


1986

Belize Teacher's College: Order Out of Chaos

Mary Margaret (Peggy) Wright

Western Kentucky University, peggy.wright@wku.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlps_fac_pub

 Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#), [Latin American History Commons](#), [Latin American Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Latin American Studies Commons](#), and the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Repository Citation

Wright, Mary Margaret (Peggy), "Belize Teacher's College: Order Out of Chaos" (1986). *DLPS Faculty Publications*. Paper 81.
http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlps_fac_pub/81

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in DLPS Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

Belize Teacher's College

ORDER OUT OF CHAOS

Mary M. Wright
Assistant Professor
Western Kentucky University

Librarians are rarely offered the opportunity to utilize their talents in a third-world country, but the summer of 1986 led this librarian to a jewel in the Caribbean, to work in Belcast's college library in Belize, Central America. When the Teacher Education Department of Murray State and Western Kentucky Universities received a USIA faculty exchange grant with Belcast College in Belize, Central America, I packed my bags. My original plan was to revert to the history teacher role. I designed a new course on Western Civilization to include the Caribbean, prepared handouts, and headed for the airport.

Once the plane landed, however, Belcast's plans changed to offer me marvelous opportunities for using my library expertise. Instead of teaching history I began work in the library at Belcast College. In order to understand the nature of libraries in this area and the staffing patterns, one must first grasp some geographic and cultural details. On the east coast of Central America rests the tiny country of Belize. Mexico borders its northern coast; Guatemala its west and south, while the Caribbean washes its eastern 240 mile coastline. A few miles offshore is the world's second largest barrier reef with its riches of plant and tropical fish life. Belize covers 8,900 square miles, forty-six percent of which is forest, 38% agricultural and 16% swamp and waste land. Current statistics claim 161,000

inhabitants, about forty thousand of whom reside in the country's major coastal city, Belize City.

This Middle America Melting Pot boasts a marvelous, diversified ethnic grouping of Blacks, Mestizo, Mayan, Garifuna, Chinese, East Indian, Creole and other small groups whose language contributions have made Belize a linguist's delight. Scholars the world over visit the far reaches of this land to record and to interpret the spoken word.

Although English is the national language, and Spanish is widely used, the dominant spoken language in the major city is Creole, a Spanish-English variety mixed with localisms. Towards the south, the Garifuna and Mayan Indians have their own distinctive tongues. Often these people speak no English, especially if they are unschooled.

The government mandates the teaching of all subjects in English beginning at the primary level, so all students are exposed to the language; many never hear it away from the school environment. The government lists about 200 primary schools throughout the country and 22 secondary schools. In addition, there is one school/home for the mentally and physically impaired. Enrollment in the primary schools is 36,000 while secondary pupils number over six thousand and college enrollment totals slightly over five hundred students.

With free and compulsory education for ages 6 to 14, the country's literacy rate is over 80%, yet few economic rewards await the educated. Most young people seek employment after high school; others pursue higher studies in one of the two-year institutions available within the country: Teacher's College, Belcast, (dissolved in 1986 and replaced by the University College of Belize), Saint John's College, and The Technical College. Each institution offers a two-year degree but students desiring a more advanced degree travel abroad or attend the University of the West Indies. The latter is the only four-year, degree granting institution within the country. With the dissolution of Belcast, the government, utilizing the interests and talents of Ferris State University, Michigan, United States, formed the University College of Belize. Its purpose is to add the third and fourth years to the existing two-year program, making it easier for Belizeans to complete their degree programs on native soil.

During the summer of 1986, the USIA grant was tied to Belcast College, so from May through August the library was shared by Belcast and Teacher's College. Currently, The University College of Belize shares the library with Teachers College. In Belize there are only two or three librarians with college degrees working full time. Their degrees are undergraduate, and no person with a degree works at Belcast's library. A young woman with a high school diploma serves as "librarian."

When I arrived, a Peace Corps volunteer, holding an ALA degree from a California university, was working in this library. She had quickly found that so much needed to be accomplished. Belcast had a room with books, not a library. Before I arrived she had worked assiduously on literature and had established a workable system for shelving Caribbean studies which we left untouched. Belizeans view a librarian as someone who merely shelves books, and therefore, not a job requiring special skills and education. In light of this, our work here was basic.

Though someone had catalogued the first three thousand books, no shelving order existed. Finding books became a treasure hunt. Neither a card catalog nor a shelf list existed, so our work started from scratch. The Peace Corps person, the young woman who was in charge of the library, and I had a conference. We decided that getting the books on the shelves according to the Dewey Decimal system would be the first priority. As the day for hard work approached, the Peace Corps volunteer had to return to the states and then there were two of us. We wondered if we had taken on too hefty a project, yet we hoped time would be on our side.

Actual work in the library began with clearing bats and mice from the book shelves. One book had a hole straight through the heart of it, eaten through by some powerful insect. The preservation problem is attributed to building construction

than it is to "librarian" neglect, since the roof above the library is an unfinished tin one where the bats nest.

Shuttered, unscreened windows line each of the longer walls in the facility. Though the shutters are closed each night, flying and crawling critters easily find their way inside.

We moved all of the books from each shelf in the upper half of the library and placed them on chairs and tables around the room, leaving one table and desk clear for cataloging. Our hearts sank as we looked at the chaos we had created. We rearranged book cases to save floor space, swept, washed, and sprayed shelves. While these shelves dried, we created written labels for "General Works" and all the other Dewey divisions and marked shelf spaces for books to be properly housed. Next we cleaned, cataloged, tabbed and placed each book on a shelf by category. The simplest form of the Dewey Decimal system was used, so that the person in charge of the collection could easily carry on when I left. After handling fifteen thousand books and cataloging thirteen thousand of them before tabbing and shelving, we met our deadline of July 31, 1986, with a big sigh of relief! By that date all books were in their proper categories but not alphabetized within the Dewey classification.

By the second week in August the printed signs for the shelves arrived from the States. A student assistant from Western Kentucky University had processed them on our Apple

Ile PC and sent them by courier. We received them one and-a-half days after she mailed them. This was record timing. With shelves identified, floors swept, furniture dusted and staightened, and somewhat organized, we felt our first moments of satisfaction. The room finally looked like a library!

Actually being a library, however, was another question. The library lacked basic sources, so I decided to compile a list of these to submit to an appropriate agency. With the help of Books in Print located at the library in the American Embassy, I found complete bibliographic information and I submitted the list to the United States Information Services. They approved the sources through their funds for Caribbean libraries and promised delivery by October.

The realization that new books were promised motivated us to begin a card catalog and shelf list. August was spent in developing a shelf list, arranging books in alphabetical order within Dewey classification, beginning a card catalog and training volunteers from the Peace Corps and the woman in charge of the library to continue each of these projects. Since all of the Peace Corps volunteers had research experience, they knew what they were working towards and showed interest and enthusiasm in processing this essential part of the library collection. These Peace Corps persons volunteered their services to the college library over and

above their initial assignments.

Before completing library organization, another problem needed attention. Daily contact with the Belizean students proved their lack in understanding in creating a research paper in proper form and establishing a bibliography. In an effort to ease this process for writers, teachers, and "librarians," I designed a large poster and hung it close to the reference desk. This poster showed each type of entry for a bibliography according to the standards of the MLA style sheet. It will remain long after the completion of the first library instruction classes, so that all will have access to its details. The initial plan was to develop a series of handouts for class distribution, but since duplication costs were prohibitive (fifty cents-Belize per sheet), this proved impossible. A descriptive sign, therefore, was better than no reminder at all.

The final aspect of the Belcast library project consisted of an orientation program for 170 students which included eight classes each of twenty or more. The principal of Belize Teacher's College, who will inherit Belcast's library on August 31, 1986, asked that I conduct a large-group lecture for orientation. This lecture lasted an hour and included detailed information about the changes made in the library. These included an explanation of the Dewey Decimal System as implemented at the college, the physical arrangement of the

library, and the card catalog, its purpose and future in the Belcast library.

All summer long, students asked about the work they saw us doing, so I felt it was appropriate to discuss with them the necessity for developing a strong library and to show its relation to programs offered. Since each student who completed the two-year program was required to write a final paper, I discussed the development of their projects. This included the purpose of research and proper bibliographic form. Several professors had asked that I do this, students showed interest and awe, and questioned each area developed.

The final phase of reorganization was to develop and to conduct library instruction. Belcast's/Teacher's College library receives only two or three journals on a consistent basis, so indexes to journals are not a necessity. This fact simplified library instruction classes. When classes came to the library, they were taken on a tour of the shelves. A large poster, enumerating the Dewey Classification utilized in this library, is posted opposite the entrance and is all of the printed help available for this library's classification scheme. Classes followed a simple pattern of instruction: They were given a tour of the library and received a detailed explanation of the Dewey system with a concentration on Education, and Belize curriculum guides. A repetition of the material about their projects sparked a

great deal of interest. They asked many questions and sought advice on their particular projects.

This library still needs a tremendous amount of basic work including cataloging, instruction, a trained librarian and too much more to enumerate in this article. A follow-up study would prove invaluable for future grant purposes and for the continuation of this current grant. Students spend a great deal of time in the library and followed the reorganization project with interest. Instructors expressed delight at the ease with which they could find needed materials. Administrators applauded our efforts. At the completion of this part of the project at Belcast, the woman in charge of the library said, "I've always wanted this library to be set up properly, but I didn't know how to do it. No one has ever helped more or worked as hard to help me in that direction. Thanks so much."

These few words rewarded the entire effort. Indeed, "Order" had been "Created" out of "Chaos".